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Egypt Military Chief Meets Putin, Portending Closer Ties With Russia

By Matthew Bodner

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President Vladimir Putin meeting with Egypt's top military commander Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi on Thursday.

Egyptian Army chief Abdel Fattah el-Sissi held talks with President Vladimir Putin in the Kremlin on Thursday while on a rare visit to Russia to boost bilateral military and economic ties, in a further sign that Cairo is seeking to align with Moscow amid deteriorating ties with the U.S.

Agreement was reached on the visit to form a Russia-Egypt intergovernmental commission on trade and economic cooperation, and news reports have said part of the reason for the trip was to finalize a $2 billion arms deal between the countries, although officials made no reference to such a deal at Thursday's meetings.

In an unexpected move, Putin also backed el-Sissi's candidacy for the Egyptian presidency — before el-Sissi himself has even confirmed that he will run. There has been speculation for months that el-Sissi will seek the post following the military-led coup that ousted Egypt's

democratically elected president, Mohamed Morsi, in July.

"I know that you have made a decision to run for the post of president of Egypt. It is a very responsible decision to assume this mission and responsibility for the fate of the Egyptian people," Putin said.

Russia has made engagement with Egypt a priority in the wake of the Arab Spring, when it lost an ally in former Libyan dictator Moammar Gaddafi and has seen the Syrian government under siege. Moscow and Cairo were strong partners half a century ago but had a falling out in the 1970s during the rule of Egyptian leader Anwar Sadat, and only recently have begun to rekindle the relationship.

Russia's interests in strengthening ties are based both on mutual concerns, such as anti-terrorism efforts and regional stability, and on opportunity. Relations between the U.S. and Egypt have soured since Washington reacted negatively to the July coup, freezing a significant portion of its annual $1.5 billion aid package.

"We are paying very close attention to the development of the internal political situation in your country, and wish the leadership of Egypt success on the path to nationwide peace and harmony," Putin said.

"To a considerable extent, the stability of the entire Middle East depends on stability in Egypt. I am convinced that you with your vast experience will be able both to mobilize your supporters and normalize relations with all sections of Egyptian society," he said.

El-Sissi said that Egypt too was interested in global stability. Morsi's ouster has been followed by a surge in violent street protests, shootings and bombings, and the interim Egyptian government says it is fighting terrorists, while critics of the regime have accused it of brutal tactics such as torturing its opponents.

"We of course are also interested in various forms of cooperation with you in the interests of providing a good life for our people in all spheres," el-Sissi said, according to a transcript of his comments on the Kremlin website. "We are always supporters of stability and peace throughout the world."

Putin's voicing of support for el-Sissi's candidacy for president indicates that Russia is placing its chips on him to lead Egypt going forward, and indeed he is expected to win this summer's election if he runs. Putin said that, once el-Sissi's government is established, "we will be able to include all mechanisms of cooperation" in the bilateral relationship.

The Egyptian Army chief traveled to Moscow with the country's foreign minister, Nabil Fahmy, and the pair met earlier Thursday with foreign minister Sergei Lavrov and Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu in what Russia calls the "2+2" format.

Lavrov said the Foreign Ministers had "agreed on how we can continue to build our bilateral relations, including the formation of a Russian-Egyptian intergovernmental commission on trade and economic cooperation in the near future." He said a meeting on the issue would take place at the end of March.

Shoigu said that he and el-Sissi had discussed the possibility of preparing agreements

on Russian and Egyptian military cooperation.

"We expect that our agreements will be translated into concrete projects that meet the security interests of our countries," Shoigu said.

Foreign news agencies have reported that one of the main reasons for the Egyptian delegation's visit was to conclude a $2 billion arms agreement, but it was unclear whether such a deal was made. Earlier this month, an Egyptian newspaper said that Egypt hoped to purchase Russian-made air defense systems, attack helicopters, MiG-29 fighter jets, and anti-tank weapons with financing from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, Interfax reported.

The groundwork for this supposed agreement may have been laid in November, when Lavrov and Shoigu flew to Cairo for a two-day visit. During that trip, they discussed arms deals and political and economic ties with their Egyptian counterparts.

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